Reluctant Discipleship
Jonah - Selected Portions
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It requires real genius to make the Old Testament boring. (See Hugh Kerr, Theology Today, July - 1975, p.13). Consider, for instance, the brief Book of Jonah. A mere two pages, it can be read in a few minutes. Yet it includes all the ingredients of a first-rate short story: action, adventure, imagination, a hero of sorts, and an unforgetable three-way encounter between God, a most accommodating whale and a reluctant disciple.

The trouble is, few of us seem to get past the creative, or outlandish, literary framework in which the author chose to speak his message. Serious Old Testament scholarship is unanimous in the observation that Jonah is ill-used and terribly misunderstood. One scholar wrote, "This is the tragedy of Jonah; that a Book which is made the means of one of the most sublime revelations of truth in the Old Testament should be known to most only for its connection with a whale." (G.A.Smith). Actually, the whale in Jonah is identified as a big fish and is incidental to the point of the story, a literary device. In fact, if it is necessary to determine a sub-title, it would be better be "A Tale of Two Cities"; for that is really what the story is about: Nineveh, where God wants Jonah, his reluctant disciple, to go; and Tarshish, where he tries to go instead.

Every school boy knows the story of Jonah, or at least the exciting part. We heard it as children: we marveled and fantisized and perhaps giggled about the ridiculous predicament in which Jonah found himself: a story vaguely paralleled in Pinnochio - who, you will recall, also spent some time inside a whale as a result of an ethical indiscretion. Unfortunately, that is all we heard of Jonah, or all we remembered and when we gained a bit of intellectusl maturity we didn't know what to do with it. In the words of an Old Testament professor, "The one thing more incredible than the story of a fish swallowing a man, is a man swallowing the story of a fish swallowing a man." A "pre-Jaws" comment, obviously. We know, yet still hesitate to tell our children, that the story was never intended to be read as an historical account. It was written, by an anonymous author in the fourth century B.C. He chose for his setting the eighth century B.C. and an obscure prophet by the name of Jonah who is mentioned in II Kings, as the main character.

The story must be read and understood in its context. The fourth century B.C. was a difficult time for Israel. The nation was ruled, for the moment, by the Greeks, the most recent conquerors in a list which included Assyria, Babylon, Persia. It was a time when theological expectation looked for the righteous wrath and justice of God to fall upon the Gentile and heathen enemies of God's special people. There was a renaissance of law and ritual and piety, all pointed inward toward the purification and renewal of Israel itself. It was a time of narrow patriotism and provincialism. And so, when fourth century B.C. people read about a prophet of Israel being sent to the very capital of their worst Gentile enemies, they would have been startled: that alone would have gained their immediate attention.

Let's look briefly at the story. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, a city noted for its wickedness; and to warn the people of Nineveh that unless their conduct improved they were headed for disaster. Jonah did not want to go: not that he was squeamish about being a prophet of doom, for later he proved rather effective in that role. He simply didn't want to go to Nineveh: a pagan, enemy stronghold: a city - a center of secular life. Theologically, the idea that God should care about the Assyrians was not a popular idea.

Instead of obeying God, Jonah boarded the next ship for Tarshish, in the words of the text, "to get away from the presence of the Lord." The choice of Tarshish was not insignificant. Nineveh was at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Tarshish was on the southwest coast of Spain. It was a seaport, possibly a colony of Semitic people: it was the furthest point accessible by ship, literally the end of the world. If one wanted to get away from God - or anybody - Tarshish was just the right choice.

Shortly after embarking, a storm threatened to sink the ship: Jonah confessed his responsibility for the crisis and with the reluctant agreement of the crew - allowed himself to be thrown overboard. Apparently drowning was preferable to going to Nineveh. But the fish interceded: inside the fish Jonah prayed, not, however, the prayer of desperate penitence we might expect. In fact, Jonah's prayer, uttered in this unusual environment is a rather pious and traditional rubric dealing with God's mercy and goodness. Never once did he utter that familiar prayer: "Get me out of here and I'll do whatever you want."

The fish delivered Jonah to dry land: God called again and this time Jonah agreed to go - a prudent decision. He did the job: he warned the Ninevites of their impending doom and retired to watch them get what they had coming. But Jonah had done the task so effectively that the entire city, from King on down, repented, donning sack cloth and ashes. God, as a result, changed His mind and spared the city. At this, Jonah became angry and petulant. As he sulked in the heat of the day a plant provided him shade. The next day the plant died and left Jonah exposed to the sun, with Nineveh, his old nemesis, prospering in the valley below. It was more than he could bear: his frustration erupted and he asked God to die. And the story concludes with God patiently reminding Jonah that if he could care so much about one plant, certainly he could understand why God should care so much about the people of Nineveh. The Book's last sentence is a classic: "Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle,"

That's all there is: the question remains unanswered. We don't know whether Jonah came down from his hill to live his life in Nineveh, or whether he boarded the next ship to try, one more time, to escape the unpleasantness of the life God was calling him to live. I do know, hoever, that this story which too frequently is discarded as childish, has a great deal to say to us. I do believe that it contains the Word of God for us.

The author's intent was "to remind them (the Jews) that they were chosen by God in order to be a light to the Gentiles." (J. Elliot Corbett, The Prophets on Main Street, p.71). The story is a sharp reminder that God's people exist for the sake of others, and that being God's people often means doing something we don't want to do. It is also a very old testimony to the universality of God's love, a love revealed in the coming of Jesus Christ for the reconciliation of the whole world; a love which constantly calls His people to expand and broaden their love: all of which I find rather contemporary in impact.

Return for a moment to the idea of the two cities: Nineveh, capital of Assyria, bustling, vulgar, threatening, dirty, crowded and Tarshish, remote, safe, distant, removed, quiet. Let Nineveh stand for the place God wants us to be, and Tarshish for the place we go in order to avoid being where God wants us. The Book of Jonah was a pointed reminder to God's people in the fourth century B.C. that they existed as His people for the sake of the Ninevehs of the world,but that they had become obsessed with Tarshish - the safely remote geography of their own internal affairs.

Allow that to address us - God's people in this time and place. I read recently about a scene in a motion picture, The Royal Hunt of the Sun. The explorer Pizarro and his men are confronted by a deep abyss in the mountains of Peru. Across the abyss stretches a flimsy rope bridge. Even the bravest among them tremble with fear. Pizarro looks over his disheveled band. In the rear stand the clergy. He issues the summons: "The Church goes first." One assumes that in this instance the church did go first, leading the way across a dangerous abyss. But it occurred to me that the scenario is not repeated very frequently. Called to be God's servant people, commissioned to be His reconciling agents, the Church of Jesus Christ is caught too often remaining in the rear: following only after someone else has tried the bridge. It took us a full century to turn our attention to the evil of racial segregation. And when we ventured across that abyss in the 1960's it was hesitantly, tentatively and only after other organizations had preceded us.

Even more immediately, this congregation is called by its Lord to be God's special people here - in this Nineveh: where hunger and poverty and unemployment and crime are daily realities. And it is so very tempting to take the first ship to Tarshish, to repeat the error of God's people twenty-four centuries ago and immerse ourselves in our own internal affairs.

It is not an easy word of God in the Book of Jonah. Rather it is a hard word that may be judgmental, a word that indicts us for our timidity: a word that calls out of us courage and strength and real faith. "Faith", one writer suggests, "is not getting your house exterminated, then locking it tightly. It is inviting into your life worthy concerns and necessary commitments. Faith is not washing your hands, expecting them to stay clean. It is getting them dirty in the service of God and of human need." (Models for Ministers, 1/25/76)

It has never been easy to be God's people. The Israelites had to be taught that difficult lesson time and time again. God saves people in order to use them: God summons people in order to send them out into the world. Every time Israel sits back to enjoy being the Chosen People, God tells them to do something they don't want to do in the world - like being a light to the Assyrians. There can be no hesitance about a Christian's commitment to and involvement in the world. For that is why God has called us: that is why He has saved us. It requires, on the bottom line, a willingness to be led by God into the world in the name of His Son. And more often than not, the part of the world into which God calls us will be no more pleasant nor appealing than Nineveh was for Jonah.

Consider these people who two hundred years ago created a revolution, many of them out of deep religious conviction. It wasn't easy. It wasn't always totally clear. Good arguments could be presented for the crown as well as the patriot position. Men struggled with that: and many must have wished a way to avoid the decision: many tried to be neutral. Listen to this paragraph from Presbyterians and the American Revolution:

"John Joachim Zubly, pastor of the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, was involved in colonial politics. He served as a delegate from Georgia to the First Continental Congress at which time colonial grievances were discussed. In Georgia he was taken into custody by the Council of Safety, and was banished in 1777 with the loss of half of his estate." (Journal of Presbyterian History, Volume 52, Number 4, p.425)

Having decided for the patriot cause many found that it took them to places they didn't want to be. John Adams had no desire to live in Boston: he was perfectly content to confine his practice of law to rural New England. But he went to the city and

helped to make a new nation. Many paid dearly - with their lives. And all would have preferred not to be involved: to avoid the decision, the commitment.

Involvement in the world, for us, may never be quite as dramatic as it was by necessity for the patriots of 1776. It may never be quite as clear. But it is a decision each person must make. God wants His people deeply and passionately and lovingly involved in His world. He calls them back from every ship to Tarshish. John D. Rockefeller, III, in a speech one time, urged people "to become involved personally and positively in the great drama of our times rather than feeling ourselves to be weary and impotent victims of imponderable forces. The antidote to despair," he suggested, "is to be involved." And Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

God calls His people to go to Nineveh: and the journey may not be far. Because He loves the whole world God summons His people to involve themselves in the complexities and ambiguities of the life of the world. One of those places, I would suggest, is the whole changing landscape of morality. My, it is tempting to take the first ship to Tarshish when it comes to the issues of abortion, and integrity in public life, and corporate political contributions. My, it would be comfortable to retreat to the ethical simplicity of the past when our young people ask the hard questions of sexual morality. And that, too frequently, I fear, is precisely what a lot of people and a lot of churches do: avoid the issues: back away as quickly and as far as possible: or assume the stance of smug arrogance that is certain of its own rightness and the total wrongness of everyone else. We may not have agreed with conclusions reached by Mrs. Ford several months ago, but she demonstrated an admirable candor and willingness to deal with moral reality. God calls His people to involvement: God calls His church to be involved in the painful moral dilemmas of our day: to bring the light of faith and hope and love to the difficult matter of defining and doing what is good.

Jonah boarded the ship in order to get away from the presence of the Lord. That act, clearly, was intended to represent the corporate decision of God's people to avoid obeying His will, by hiding behind their religion. Sometimes I think the religiosity of our culture invites that. The fourth century Jews were so involved in the rituals and rules of their religion, that they were unable to know God's presence, to perceive His love, or to hear His voice. And I wonder if, in fact, a lot of the popular piety in our culture does not accomplish that same end. An article in the Entertainment Section of the New York Times last Sunday asked why the serious questions of theology - the questions of God, death, forgiveness and hope are rarely dealt with by American film producers, and when they do appear it always seems to be with a singular lack of sensitivity or intelligence. The best we can do, for all our religiosity, are caricatures of bumbling and effeminate clergymen, silly references to the man upstairs, and maudlin portraits of popular ecclesiatics. The real questions of religion keep popping up in European films and of all places films produced by Marxists, who at least have the courage to ask the questions, even if they come up with wrong answers. The article inferred that American Christians have become intellectually lazy about what they profess to believe: that we don't openly deal with the issues which have troubled the mind of man since the beginning of time, because we have to think too hard.

It is tempting to resist intellectual involvement in the difficult questions of life: to garner one's theology from Billy Graham's daily newspaper column, to find a church that requires the depositing of all critical faculties, all intellectual

curiosity outside the door, and which is content providing answers to questions no one is asking any longer. But God calls His people, His reluctant disciples, to involvement. And every time we try to take a ship to Tarshish; every time we turn away from the tough and difficult issues, every time we fail to be His people when He needs us most, He calls us back.

God's love for the whole world and all the people of the world is at the heart of the story of Jonah: not just Jerusalem - but Nineveh: not just the churches, but the court rooms and the department stores: not just the green mountains and lovely meadows, but the teeming ghettoes, and the nervous suburbs. God loved Nineveh - and He loves Washington, and Columbus, and London and Moscow and even New York.

God loves the whole world so much that He sent His Son into it. The incarnation which we celebrated a month ago happened not in the lovely countryside, but in a cow barn in the middle of a census. And the supreme act of God's love occurred, not at the altar of a quiet cahtedral, but on the city garbage dump, outside a major metropolis, on a hill called Golgotha.

To be God's people is to learn to love the world as He does: the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is the process of opening our arms and hearts in love to other people - people we don't like, people we don't trust, people who appear to be our enemies.

The story of Jonah is the Gospel - the Good News that God loves the whole world so much that He sent His Son into it. The summons of Jonah is the call to Discipleship. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

That is what God has always wanted of His people: it is what He asks of you and me: a love wide enough to embrace the whole world: a love deep enough to follow where He leads. Amen.

God, our Father, we are capable of loving more, and doing more and giving more of ourselves. Forgive us when we look for ways to avoid Your call: pardon our reluctant discipleship. And by Your love for us make us Your joyful and faithful people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.